

Laurie Anderson on reality and non-reality



November 14, 2016 - Laurie Anderson is an electronic music pioneer, visual artist, performance artist, film director, inventor, iconic thinker, and dog lover. You can try keeping up with her projects at her [website](#).

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3835 words.

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I was thinking about virtual reality today—because of the election. This idea of creating a new world, versus engaging in the world as it is. I know you’ve been working a bit in VR, as have many people, and I was curious if what’s happening in the world right now has changed your thoughts on it at all. You know, “Do I want to create something different and imaginary or do I want to change what’s here?”

That’s a question I have every time I make something. Right now I’m writing something, and people are asking, “Is it fiction or is it real?” I was like: “Well, I’m really not sure where that line goes.” And I’m really not. And, being an artist is what? Real or fantasy or...? Even when I’ve tried to work in the real world, it seems more deeply fantastical than anything I could make up. The fact that it happened, does it make it less fictional than if it never happened? I’m not sure. It’s the same in VR.

Recently, I spent time in a pyramid in the Yucatan—in a secret pyramid by James Turrell. Jim built a huge pyramid with a lake on top and a viewing device. It’s over Cenote, an underground lake, which are all over the Yucatan. They were made maybe a billion years ago or something. Meteors punched through the crust and made these underground lakes. They’re all connected: If you drop a note down in one of them, it will show up in another. They’re all connected by lakes.

Me and three other people were there to talk about the future of the planet. We didn’t come up with anything, I have to say, but we had a really good time. One of the things that reminded me of this was that you looked up at the sky through an ellipse shaped hole; you looked at the sky all night. Around this hole was another ring of light, which always was shifting. It wasn’t like camping and looking at the night sky; it was like looking at yourself looking at the night sky. Your interpretation of what black is always influenced by, “Is it surrounded by lime green or baby pink?” As the sun rises and the sky goes through every single phase that it could, from black to blue, including pink and red, you realize that even so called, “Seeing things,” is an act of comparison, memory, labeling and, fiction. It was never that as clear to me before as that. I’ve thought, “Oh, the sky is green!” I said, “Because it’s ringed with pink.” “Oh my, it’s brown!” “Because it’s against dark blue.”

We talked in this desultory way about what we could do. And, I mean... I’ve missed the thinkers in the last year. I haven’t heard from very many thinkers. The level of discussion has sunk to the rock bottom. Although, just when you think you’ve found a rock, you might find something else, like the slime beneath it. I’m fairly terrified and trying to not be; I’m trying to be an informed person who’s getting a lot of energy from a terrible situation. I largely blame myself for not seeing that we just very slowly didn’t seem to have a middle class anymore. I thought, “Where have I been?”

I do wonder if the interest in VR will shift a bit now that reality itself seems like it needs so much attention paid to it.

I don’t think so. I mean, not for me. Last week I did a public conversation with a guy named Matthieu Ricard, who wrote a book called *A Plea for the Animals*. He’s an interesting guy. He’s a forest monk, so you’ve already got to love him! *[Laughs]* He’s also a very rigorous thinker, French and logical. He demolishes every single argument, every single possible argument that you might have about the downside of veganism.

I’m not a vegan, but every single argument was so elegant and perfect. From, of course, the ecological disaster that meat eating creates... Also, what the meat industry tells you and doesn’t tell you. You realize, “Whoa, I’m a complete dupe.” The reason I’m mentioning this is that one of the arguments was like, “How could you just be so interested in the welfare of animals when so many humans are suffering?”

So, that argument. Like, say I’m a stamp collector or a dance enthusiast, is anyone going to say, “How could you be spending so much time pasting stamps into a book when so many people are suffering?” They’re micromanaging your humanitarian time, that you have to cut it exactly the way they think you should cut it. Also, as if they were mutually exclusive or that one didn’t enforce the other. It’s kind of part of a same sort of scale of kindness and awareness.

I was working with some lawyers from Reprieve on this Guantanamo project. I got an email from them this morning reminding us of Donald Trump’s promises in terms of torture. He believes in the effectiveness of torture and he had promised to do a lot more. He said, “Waterboarding doesn’t work. I’m going to do things that hurt a lot more than that.” The function of words in this campaign is just so incredibly wild because we’ve all become experts in the last year of the stories that these people come up with, of why the world is like this, describing what it is and describing what it should be like. You realize it’s story. How else does any of this match? I think this is part of the shock for people of the election results, is that the stories don’t match. The media story didn’t match the so called reality either, at all.

Then, you’re in a world where the stories and the reality don’t match. You realize there’s a lot of disparity. You can make up any story. Virtual reality is another story. For me, it’s also a way of working with language in a visual world. I’ve had a lot of different strategies of how to get stories into places. They’ve been sometimes making three-dimensional films or hiding the stories in pillows. There’s been ways how you make people stop.

In the past, you’ve talked about 9/11, and being in New York when that happened. You kept going and kept making work. In a situation like this, one thing I’ve heard people say is: “The silver lining is that great art will come from this.” Which honestly doesn’t always feel like a silver lining. But, as someone who’s made art for a long time, and who has always remained productive, what are some strategies or ways that you keep going?

Well, I say that whether I’m having a good time or a bad time really. I think being in a really liberal progressive time can also be inspiring. You can also make work that isn’t quite so politically pointed. I don’t think that work that’s politically pointed is necessarily more worthy than something that isn’t. My example is always like, a giant blue painting can be much more about freedom than 1800 performance pieces about how free you should be or songs about that. It works with experience, not necessarily some kind of encoded message. Are you blown away by that sound? By that color? By that imagery? Just plain blown away? It doesn’t give you an agenda of what you should be doing.

I don’t feel specific political work has ever really inspired me that much, frankly. I’m more inspired by things that are just really daring in other ways, that are just like, “break every other rule.” Rule breaking is much more interesting to me than trying to give people messages encoded in music or painting. It’s just like... Why don’t you just to tell me what to do? Why do you have to put it in this thing here for me to decode?

I often don’t really feel that those kinds of works are that successful, for me. Maybe for other people they are. I don’t think anybody really enjoys being told what to do, even in code.

What about the last Anohni album?

It’s different because I don’t think Anohni does that. She sings songs that are really passionate and are her own experiences. It’s how she feels about it. It’s not what you should do about it. She’s a very honest artist. That’s how I think it works. I think if you avoid the stage of feeling it yourself then, what you’re doing is illustrating a billboard.

People feel paralyzed, especially younger people I’ve spoken to, people in their 20s.

Did they vote?

They did. But they feel like the world is over. I've found myself in the position of being like, "No. What you can do now is put on an event. Talk to people. Create. You can do things. There're ways to keep going."

It might be what was left of what Occupy needs—this kind of emergency. It does make people go, "Oh my god! How could I've missed that?" Suddenly, there's a whole lot of energy. I agree that good energy comes out of bad stuff. Most of the work that I've done as an artist—forget what political era I was living in—comes from something breaking. Saturday I'm going to go to Copenhagen to work with Brian Eno. It's always so much fun. We worked here in the studio on a bunch of things. Stuff breaks, especially in home studios. And, when something did, he couldn't have been happier. Something broke or didn't work according to our plan and he was just like, "Fantastic." He'd rub his hands and be really happy about it. He believed in the process, which is so great, because you can find out things. Your materials teach you things.

Five sound works by Laurie Anderson, one per decade:

1970s - Laurie Anderson / John Giorno / William S Burroughs - [You're The Guy I Want To Share My Money With](#)

1980s - ["O Superman"](#)

1990s - [The Ugly One With the Jewels](#)

2000s - [HomeLand](#)

2010s - ["Music For Dogs"](#)

I think that anytime you try to get a message or think, "What is that thing supposed to do?," you're not working with the materials that are there... sometimes you force them to do things that they can't do. They just can't talk to you in that way. If you're a sculptor, you'll find that you hit stuff too hard and it's in pieces on the floor. It doesn't work.

It will be fun working with Brian. He's a master remixer as well as composer. I remember one time when we were working on something. It was a song, it wasn't very good at all. It was really standard instrumentation. It had like drums, shakers, bells, vocals, strings and horns. You're like, "That's just ridiculous." It wasn't working. I was really struggling. He said, "Just go out for a walk for awhile. Let me just spend a little time by myself." I was like, "I can't leave!" I'm such a control freak, I was freaking out. He finally said, "Yeah, you can. Just go."

I pried myself out and then came back. I never heard anything like this. The whole thing was inverted. The shaker was about 18 feet in diameter, really slowed down. The only thing that worked in the track was the shaker. He made it front and center. The vocals are like 15 miles away, lots of reverb. Then, drums ... It was beautiful. It was just beautiful. I realized, never despair. Just get Brian Eno to come and remix it for you or else, just do it yourself.

I tried to learn from things by doing stuff, by handling them, by doing things. I'm such a roadie. I'm such a techno geek. For me, when things break, I'm like, "Oh great." I'm beginning to really appreciate that and to try to use it. Try to think about what I'm doing. Although, a friend of mine just sent me a really interesting email. She said, "Do you think anymore?" She said, "I've been realizing, that as opposed to thinking, I come up with prepared statements." My blood went cold because I realized, "That's what I do too." You think about something a little bit and then you come up with an opinion or a prepared statement about it.

Now, there's nothing wrong with floating stuff like that. You kind of have to float something and put it into words and say, "Is it anything?" That's also a way of thinking. But I realized how little time I just sit right around and think about things. Just to let them flow. Go out without trading prepared statements with other people, which is called some kind of conversation or something. That's really all you're doing. Then, not even really listening that much to the other person's prepared statement because you've got to get to your next one. It's really wild. I totally do that.

On June 23rd, I was on my way to Athens. When I left New York, the UK was in the EU. When I got off the plane in the morning, everybody else's phone, and my phone's, going, "Brexit. Brexit." I was like, "What?" That's ridiculous. Now, I'm in Athens and the first seven people I talked to said the same thing. I asked them "What do you think about this Brexit thing?" They all said the same thing, they said, "Well, I have to think about it." I was like, "I'm in the land of philosophers." I have to think about it. You're not just going to give me a knee jerk, *New York Times* answer or what you just heard from your friend, answer. You're going to think about it.

That made a huge impression on me. I've been trying to apply that lately, to just mull it a little bit. You don't have to tweet it in four seconds.

Last night, I had an event. So many people were telling me, "I'm just a wreck. I'm paralyzed." I said, "Just come over. We'll just sit around for an hour." So many people showed up. Not that we talked about [Trump's victory] so much. One of the people who was helping me arrange it was saying, "Why don't you not talk about what you think it should do, or analyze why it got to be there... that way or how that could have ever happened. But, just for an hour, focus on how you feel about it."

That was really hard for people to do. You immediately want to jump to fix it. I feel terrible but, here's what we can do. I feel terrible but, she shouldn't of lost because she made this mistake... Analyzing it. Which is all really important to do but, to spend at least a few minutes thinking how you, yourself, feel. Then, you realize how dependent you are on this idea of who's in charge. You don't have to necessarily be so dependent.

Parents are also telling me that they were looking to European friends for advice on [the election] because they said, "European friends do not, for example, look to a President as somebody that you admire." They said, "It's just a politician." No better, no worse. You have to be their moral example. But here, "Are you going to grow up to be President? Because that has this big ..." It's like mom, it has a big moral ... It's a moral force. When a guy who runs on a platform of hatred and lying gets in, kids go, "Oh, wait a second. Everybody likes a guy who hates and lies. What's that about?"

The election itself has a lot to do with what these sort of family dynamics—you know, dad and mom. I mean, how much are they dad and mom for us? You yourself are a dad, what are you supposed to do? Then... like, Tim Kaine was a typical American dad and going like, "Hey buddy! You're going to make it! You're a good guy. Everything's going to be good." Pence is a typical American stepdad going like, "I'm with your mom, that's why I'm here. It's not because of you, pal. You get out as soon as you can and make your own living."

As someone who's made a lot of work across all kinds of moments, and continues to do so, have you ever had creative blocks? If so, how do you get past those?

I made some software for that once when I did a CD-ROM, years ago, for people with writer's block. The terror for many writers is the blank page. What if you started with a full page and you had to carve away, like a sculptor. You gradually substitute your friend's names or their ... Different cities and then, the situations. Very soon, you have a novel and no one will see the template was *Crime and Punishment*. It will be the structure. How you introduce it. What's the first scene?

When young artists ask, "How can I get past these things?" I respond: "For one thing, try doing your very worst work. Do the worst song you can possibly think of. At the very least, you'll get some idea of what your rules are. At the most, you're going to get something that's better than anything you've ever done because it has a lot of pure energy." Just make it bad. Just make it really bad. You know, so pure and bad. I have tried that. That works well. Sometimes I clutch on that, too. I think, "No, that's so bad it's good." Go on and on and get yourself twisted up into a language!

Or, I would say, when you get stuck, study the things that you love. How do you make a painting? Are you really stopping time and, just like, where are you? Are you actually just referring to a really fragile moment? How do you relate to that?

With this picture [points to a photo of Lou Reed] that was pretty posed. Yet, at the same time, he has a look of critical attention. There's nothing posed about that look. It's not a photographic expression. That's very unusual. That's one of the reasons I loved having it in the studios. It's a very aware moment. He's not trying to sum up anything. He doesn't care if you like him, at all.

And, that's another thing I like about VR is that it is about disembodiment. In VR, you are disembodied. It's beyond freeing. Our own self image is what? You know, the so-called, "Real world." This real world is such a fiction. We're doing a Jim Turrell thing. We're comparing things, all the time. Comparing this moment to the next, not really here in the moment. Not really believing that our minds are jumping so many other places that we're unable to think.

Last night, when we did the meditation, it was a very simple one. It was straight ahead, follow your breaths, be in your body, try to calm yourself. That's difficult for people when you're flying away into the blogosphere every second. Thinking, "I'm a virtual citizen. I've got to be somewhere else." Thinking about somewhere else, something else, and doing something else. You can't just be sitting here in your body with these shoes, this shirt.

But I have blocks all the time. I approach them in different ways. One, I make something that I think does work and just enjoy it for awhile. That'll seep into your own strategies. Then, doing something else is helpful. Doing your worst work is helpful.

As I hear myself talking about this and I'm thinking about the things that I'm completely procrastinating on. I realized that I've applied those and they have not worked. I'm full of hot air! *[Laughs]* That one isn't working. None of those are working. This is a pretty good case.

Sometimes, I think you just have to sit there. That's what writers say. Sit there for five hours a day and then leave. If you didn't write anything, sit there for five hours the next day. That's what Phil Glass said about practicing and learning to compose. He just sat there with an alarm clock on the piano. Sometimes he would just sit there, looking at the clock. He's somebody that really puts in the time.

I've been playing with Phil a lot lately. It's been really interesting and fun. I remember one particular thing, the summer before this we were playing Ravello. It was a hard day. We had traveled there. We rehearsed. We'd done the show. We'd gone out for an endless dinner. It was two in the morning and we came back. I had to leave for Rome in a couple of hours. I was just packing and doing stuff. I came up from the garden and he was there with *[his girlfriend]* Sari. They had just done two hours of yoga. I was like, "Phil, it's four in the morning. Couldn't you do it tomorrow?" He said, "No, I wouldn't of done it today. I need to do it everyday. If I don't do it, I'll stop doing it." He's like that with music, too. He's so disciplined. It's amazing. I've known Phil for many decades. He's always been like that. He's dedicated. He puts the time in. He's also massively, musically talented. he's a genius, a hard working genius.

People assume it's easy. They're like, "How did that get done?" Not thinking that it wasn't easy. Oh, gosh, I've been through so many plan B's in my life, it's crazy. Sometimes they're much better and sometimes they're not at all. Sometimes it's just that circumstances meant that you couldn't do something else.

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Vocation

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Fact

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Photo: Ebru Yildiz